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AUTHOR Swartz, Patti Capel; Hardesty, Constance
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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an effort to coordinate teaching in two college classes--an Introduction to Sociology class and a Writing II class--to focus on issues of entitlement, such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality. The tandem effort was designed to encourage students to explore the subjects more deeply than would have been likely in one class alone. In addition to description of the teaching effort, the paper includes discussion of linking macro-level studies with micro-level experiential essays, timing of the course material, using Appalachian and class inequality as a framework for understanding other forms of oppression and the integration of oppressions, and reinterpreting Christianity to challenge rather than justify inequality. The paper concludes that pairing the writing and sociology courses, while not entirely successful in ridding all students of entrenched belief systems that reinforce oppression, makes the task more enjoyable and effective. (EV)

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Putting the Pieces Together: Teaching in Tandem about Race, Class, Ethnicity, and Gender at an Appalachian Regional University

Patti Capel Swartz
Assistant Professor of English
Kent State University, East Liverpool

Constance Hardesty
Associate Professor of Sociology
Morehead State University

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Patti Capel Swartz
Assistant Professor of English
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What happens in the classroom of a regional university in Appalachia when an Introduction to Sociology class and a Writing II class are paired? When both professors focus on issues of entitlement--issues of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality--student interest is piqued, the quality of work becomes appreciably better, and student retention of material is enhanced. During the Spring, 1999 semester, we were fortunate to be able to teach together in "paired" classes. Connie's materials for Introduction to Sociology and the reading materials and discussion Patti used as a springboard to writing worked to the benefit of students in both classes.

We had this opportunity because education reform in Kentucky (reform mandated from Kindergarten through College) has as a focus interdisciplinary pairings of CORE curriculum classes, particularly writing and subject area classes. Individually, we had presented critiques of class, gender, ethnicity, race and sexuality, but we found that making connections between readings, media presentations, and discussions made a more satisfying and deeper learning experience for students and provided increased satisfaction for us as teachers because of the increase in student interest and comprehension.

Separately, for several years each of us had focused on the issues that we joined in teaching about last spring. Although students in Patti's writing classes who were enrolled in sociology classes often spoke of how the materials in the class were very similar to what they were studying in sociology, no real correlation between the classes was involved. Patti noted that in those classes, students who were in sociology classes were often more willing to think deeply about the issues looked at in her writing class: they were not so quick to dismiss ideas that for many students seemed radical. Both Connie and Patti encountered initial resistance

when discussing issues of gender, sexuality, race and class in classes, particularly with traditional age students who often had accepted stereotypes about the issues widely believed in their families, stereotypes reinforced through media images and through cultural contexts and beliefs.

Although many characterize Appalachia as an area isolated from much of the country, an area stereotyped as one in which homogeneity of population and rigid adherence to gender roles inhibits change, or even ideas of or discussion of change, in our classrooms we have found that this is not the case. Indeed, our Appalachian students, who themselves often reflect the gender, racial and ethnic diversity usually ignored in discussions of Appalachia, really come alive when reading about, writing about, and discussing issues that directly affect them. Because members of our classes have so often been stereotyped themselves, they understand what stereotyping is and its affects. However, many are not really aware of the stereotyping that they themselves engage in when considering gender, class, and racial issues. Awareness of the ways in which students have not interrogated their own preconceptions and prejudices can help those students to reject the stereotypes they often hold. We believe that it is imperative that students should not attend college without looking closely at their assumptions and without considering the these issues that have been and continue to be insidiously woven into our culture. As many students say after completing the class, "I think everyone should have to take a class like yours."

It can, however, be lonely when teaching in isolation about these highly charged issues. Initial student resistance is often great, and even far into the semester the work can be discouraging, for often it seems that the students will never "get it." When the ideas discussed are shared between classes and learning communities created in the classrooms, however, the results are not so long coming, nor does resistance continue so long. Patti's situation was ideal for seeing this, for she had two classes to Connie's one: the forty or so students in Connie's class composed two sections of writing classes. In writing classes, because of the smaller number of students involved, discussion could be extended further than in the format of Connie's class that of necessity (not desire) because of its size required more of a lecture format. Also, the very nature of a writing class enables a teacher to learn

more about the ways that students are thinking, about their attitudes, and their openness to change. The materials in the classes, although certainly not the same, reinforced learning in both, and students were well aware of these parallels.

Both Patti and Connie were aware of the other's work through students with whom both had worked, and they appreciated the opportunity to work together. They met prior to the beginning of classes, and provided one another access to many of the materials each would use. Patti began the semester with an interrogation of individual subject position and a look at education that critically examines the nature of schools, how race, class, and gender biases are often reinforced in the educational system, and the power of words to creating legal and social constructions of race, class, and gender. This discussion of the power of language begins in the syllabus used for this class. Patti writes:

> Social organizations and our perceptions of them are constructed through language: through codification to create a body of laws and legal precedents, and through formal and informal discourse in the creation of social and political mores and expectations. The messages that we receive from our culture about social behavior come to us through family, the groups with whom we associate, education, and laws. Language is used by all of these groups to create precedents for behavior, to pass on beliefs and ideas, and, often, to obscure meaning of what certain social constructs mask. Language is used to exclude certain groups as well as for coded purposes within groups, i.e., the often elitist discourse (like that of this sentence) that surrounds and constructs the practice of education in the United States, or the creation and use of Black English as a means of protection in an often hostile social order dominated by whites in which, as James Baldwin noted, understanding danger quickly and completely could make the difference between living and dying. We will explore the multiple uses of language in social, legal, and political settings as practiced by and within dominant groups and internally within those groups who have had less power in this culture, and we will examine the ways these power differentials developed and are continued.

The purpose of this course is permit students to think critically about and research and write about issues in both disciplinary specific forms and in personal essays. Writing and reading will focus on the social and political structures of race, class and gender. Goals include communication through writing and revisions of essays and other forms of writing that demonstrate understanding of readings and discussion and of personal research, and that demonstrate critical thinking. This course will provide experience in group work and collaboration, the use of writing and discussion to explore the relationships of course materials to students' own lives with a view of understanding the perspectives of others, and critical thinking and analysis of materials. The relationship of materials presented in this class and in that of Introduction to Sociology will be explored, and learning communities examining ideas and constructs important to and contained in course materials for both classes will be created through collaborative work inside and outside the classroom, and through the use of newsgroups.

Because cooperation is an important human value, one that is essential to change of human institutions and creation of equity in social structures, collaboration and cooperation will be stressed in this class as a part of the learning experience and as a part of evaluation. Cooperation, not competition, will be rewarded.

Early classes engage students in discovering and writing about their attitudes toward education and language. This has a double purpose, for the students who usually fear writing when entering the classroom are able to relax a bit as they become more familiar with many uses of language and the ways in which language is practiced. In this class, as a way of pointing out how social practices are formed and sometimes ritualized, and to indicate that more than one type of research is valuable, Patti also discussed ethnography in early classes, and a part of the total writing assignments for the class consisted of students completing an

ethnography about one aspect of their lives and the people involved in it. The subjects of these ethnographies ranged from gender concerns in storytelling by a group who gathered at a farm supply store in one students home community to observation of behavior of fans at local basketball games, and how this behavior seemed to be influenced by age and gender to reactions of members of a mixed gender group of African American students who had self-segregated in the student union when two white men joined the group and engaged in conversation.

Students read Gordon Allport's assessment of in-groups and reference groups, and how these are formed, then were asked to delineate their own in-groups and assess how these were formed. Students were asked to consider how privilege affects people and the relationships in which people are engaged, paying particular attention to white privilege, gender and sexual privilege, and heterosexual privilege. The effects of race, class, and gender prejudice were examined from several viewpoints through reading of personal and more formal essays, and students also examined issues of homelessness and child abuse. In the discussion of child abuse, students discussed how social mores and the tenor of the community itself determines what is considered to be abuse or neglect, and they considered the importance of care in investigation and determination of findings: the impact these could have on the lives of the individuals involved. An in-depth study of the laws that pertained to slaves, the "Jim Crow" laws reinforced by Plessey v Ferguson, and the battle against school segregation examined not only racial constructions, but also constructions that affect gender and sexuality: i.e., the value of slave women who had no ownership of the self, and whose bodies could be the sexual property of the master, for his own physical use, or as a means to increase his wealth through selective breeding and propagation.

Eugenics and the ways in which this "science" was used to discredit groups, including those European groups like Italians, Greeks, Irish, and Welsh who were not always considered to be desirable or even to be white, also looked at the position of all women in regard to procreation and birth control. This discussion led to preconceptions of gender and sexuality: to discussion of the supposed "naturalness" of activities gendered because of sex and physical construction, and to the supposed "naturalness" of heterosexuality.

Students are often reluctant to begin discussions of sexuality and gender, particularly of homosexuality, but in discussion and in their writing show the necessity and desire to explore and understand difference. Because students have so often been barraged by media stereotypes, and because religious prohibition has been so great, thinking in this area tends to be most stereotypical. Students often believe the conservative discourse about "special rights," but after discussion of some circumstances like those of Sharon Kowalski and Karen Thompson, hate crimes like the Matthew Shepherd murder, and actual discrimination practiced economically toward lesbians, gays, bisexual and trans people, they are often not so quick to judge. For the many students who have gay friends or relatives, making homosexuality a part of open discussion is a great relief, despite their initial nervousness. Indeed, bringing issues of race, class, and gender to discussion in the classroom allows students to interrogate their own beliefs and examine the beliefs of parents and the communities from which they come, offering as well rich material for writing. Discussion of class issues, very much a part of the students lives and perceptions, and discussion of the many ways in which oppressions overlap allows white students to shed some of their anger and guilt, and to make a beginning of interrogating, becoming aware of, and clarifying their own beliefs.

Linking Macro-Level Studies With Micro-Level Experiential Essays

One of the major advantages of pairing sociology with writing is that it provides the opportunity to link macro level studies with individual level and personal understandings through writing. For example, in the Intro to Sociology course, Connie focused on poverty at the macro level including social statistics on what groups were most likely to be in poverty and an examination of economic and social policies that maintain the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few. Earlier, in the Writing course, the students were reading personal accounts of poverty from the point of view of a homeless woman living out of her car. Though Patti and Connie have always attempted to help students understand the link between the personal experience of inequality and the social forces that create the inequality, the course pairing allowed them to do so much more effectively. The increased amount of

course time, the contributions of two instructors, and the bonding of students resulting from the paired experience all facilitated this process.

Timing of Course Material

One of the strategies that Connie and Patti adopted was to deal with the same issues but not necessarily simultaneously. For example, Connie dealt with the macro level analysis of poverty a week or so following the discussions in Patti's classes. This staggering of material allowed students more processing time and also prevented them from being inundated with too much of the same material at once. For example, while Patti introduced her course focusing on language, Connie initially spent time dealing with major theories and concepts of Sociology generally. Connie then moved into an examination of inequality and was able to pick up on Patti's analysis of language using an essay by Caffilene Allen, *And Then They Changed My Name*. At this point, following from their experiences in the writing class, students were able to understand the power of language to define groups. Thus the students were able to explore in Allen's essay how as a young girl from Appalachia, she was renamed by the dominant group, learning to be ashamed of her own mother and her culture.

Putting the Pieces Together: Using Appalachian and Class Inequality as a Framework for Understanding Other Forms of Oppression and the Integration of Oppressions.

The paired teaching allows more opportunity for students to analyze the ways in which they have been stereotyped and dominated and to translate these personal experiences into a broader understanding of multi-dimensional inequality. For example, by beginning with an exploration of the cultural stereotyping and economic colonization of Appalachia, students that have experienced anti-Appalachian sentiments have a framework for analyzing classism, racism, sexism, and homophobia more generally.

Though not all our students are from the Appalachian area, a clear majority regardless of where they are from, have experienced some form of economic exploitation and are generally receptive to an exploration of class inequality when it is couched within their own experiences. Hence teaching inequality by beginning with an emphasis on Appalachia inequality and moving into classism, generally has proven useful. Further, examining the

intersections of several forms of inequality helps students to 'put the pieces together' in recognizing inequality as a system of oppressions. For example, using the film *Fast Food Women*, an Appalshop film that exposes class and gender inequality in the fast food industry in Appalachia, allows the students to understand that exploitation in Appalachia is a manifestation of class inequality generally and that this exploitation influences women differently and usually more severely than men. A discussion of the Appalachian, class, and gender inequality presented in the film *Fast Food Women* is followed with an exploration of the severe exploitation of women worldwide in the 'global assembly line'. Couching this exploration of global inequality within their own experiences of inequality allows students to more effectively identify with the exploitation of women globally.

Turning Religion on its Head: Reinterpreting Christianity to Challenge Rather then Justify Inequality.

Again using the understanding of Appalachian and class oppression as a framework for understanding other oppressions, in the sociology section Connie asks students to analyze the role of religion, specifically Christianity, in maintaining dominance in the Appalachian coal towns. For example, they explore the use of company preachers to suppress the use of religion as a vehicle for social change and they discuss the use of the 'protestant work ethic' to justify worker exploitation. From this point, it is possible to move into an analysis of how religion, and Christianity specifically, has been used to justify 'manifest destiny' and the demise of Native American populations, slavery, ethnic cleansing globally, and racism more generally. It is then possible to explore how religion has been reinterpreted to fight for social change as in the civil rights movement.

Once students have been introduced to a critical analysis of Christianity's influence on class and race oppression, they are more accepting of exploring alternative interpretations of Christianity that question sexism. For example, we contrast the primary significance attached to prominent female characters in the New Testament of the Bible with the seemingly minor position of women in contemporary Christian churches and in public positions of power today.

Finally, a critical examination of religion is used to question homophobia in today's society. For many of the students, the religious prohibition has been so significant in the formation of their concept of homosexuality, that the resistance to understanding homosexuality as a basis for oppression is usually very intense. However, the personalization of this issue that takes place in the writing course through the discussions of the Sharon Kowlaski and Karen Thompson case, the Matthew Shepherd murder, and students personal understandings, enables students to be much more comfortable with the topic by the time it is dealt with in the Sociology course. This prior introduction to the issue of homosexuality makes it possible to effectively deal with the aspects of religious prohibition from a sociological perspective. From a macro level perspective Connie asks the students to question the motivations of the Religious Right's focus on homosexuality as a primary issue when it is almost entirely ignored in the Gospels. This analysis enables students to recognize that homophobia, like other forms of oppression is about power, control, and dominance rather than morality and religion.

Conclusion

Pairing the Writing course with Introduction to Sociology has not made teaching about inequality an easy or completely successful task. There are still students who leave the course entrenched in their old belief systems that justify and reinforce a variety of oppressions. However, it certainly makes a daunting task more enjoyable and more effective. The increased exposure to these topics, the contributions of two instructors, and the bonding of students through the paired experience provides conditions that are conducive to developing an awareness that challenges intersecting systems of oppression and enables students to truly put the pieces together.